DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 267 SP 010 905

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TITLE A Political View--Factors that Impinge on K-12 Curriculum Development and Inservice Education at the School District and Building Level.
PUB DATE Feb 77
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting, Association of Teacher Educators (57th, Atlanta, Georgia, February 2-5, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Agents; *Change Strategies; Curriculum Development; Educational Change; *Elementary Secondary Education; *Inservice Teacher Education; *Instructional Improvement; *Political Influences; Power Structure; Professional Continuing Education; School Community Relationship; *School Districts; Teacher Administrator Relationship

ABSTRACT

This document examines the factors that hinder effective change in curriculum development and inservice education at the school district and building level and suggests strategies for promoting a climate conducive to such change. The school district/building is described as a political environment, influenced by relationships between teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other special interest groups. These influences are arranged into four clusters (internal--formal and informal, external--formal and informal), and examples of each are given and briefly discussed. Prospects for educational change are viewed as possible if those involved realize the political nature of the institutions in which they function and make a continuous effort to deal openly and trustingly with others. Specific examples of approaches which have worked in promoting change are cited, grouped into the four clusters previously described. The paper closes with a statement of need for both preservice and inservice educators to become familiar with the school as a political institution in order to produce effective change. (MP)

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A POLITICAL VIEW--FACTORS THAT IMPINGE ON K-12 CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND INSERVICE EDUCATION AT THE SCHOOL DISTRICT AND BUILDING LEVEL

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Introduction

Each school is a battleground of forces formal and informal, visible and invisible, which have positive and negative impacts on the instructional programs. Those seeking to facilitate instructional change, if they are to be successful, must be aware of and learn how to deal with the many forces which are at work, including political factors. Those of us who seek instructional change do so mainly through two important and interrelated activities--inservice education and curriculum development. Inherent in curriculum development and inservice education efforts is a desire and need for instructional improvement. However, many of the forces at work in schools do not want change or, at best, are interested only in a narrow or specific area of self interest. Perhaps that is why there is so little significant instructional improvement going on!

Definitions

To deal effectively with a discussion of the amorphous political climate of schools requires that some words be defined in operational terms. It is axiomatic to say that the curriculum is all the experiences a student has under the

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guidance of the school. Curriculum development aims to improve, enhance, and expand these experiences through planning, designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating new activities.

A key thesis in this paper is that the definition of "inservice education" is all the experiences a staff member has in connection with the school. Of course, there are formal professional development activities--courses, workshops, and seminars. There are also informal growth experiences--professional readings, exchanges of ideas with peers, the taking on of leadership roles, etc. A new and challenging teaching assignment or implementing an innovation can contribute greatly to professional improvement. In order to handle the new task, additional skills and understandings must be developed. The school climate is also a force for or against faculty growth. If a staff lives in an open environment where trying new ideas and risk-taking are encouraged, it is likely that more change in faculty behavior will take place. In a restrictive climate, less change will be evident.

The type and quality of faculty relationships and communication are also powerful factors in professional growth. Events such as teacher strikes or staff lay-offs, or situations such as lack of learning materials or violence against pupils and staff affect how much the faculty is willing or able to change. Thus, the total milieu of the school is the inservice program, including the formal and informal experiences provided.

Perhaps it would be helpful to the reader to know the orientation the writer brings to these observations. As deputy superintendent of a Michigan intermediate school district, working with a sizable staff of consultants who assist local (K-12) districts in the improvement of their instructional programs is a major responsibility. These thirty-six districts are located in southeastern Michigan and range in size from the city of Detroit to small semi-rural school systems. The total school population of the service area is greater than the populations of twenty of our states. Intermediate offices in Michigan serve both as arms of the state and as resources for local districts. From this vantage point, the political nature of instructional change becomes highly visible. An understanding of these forces is essential to successful operation of such a service agency.

Thus, we are brought to the last operational definition--"politic." The Thorndike-Barnhart Comprehensive Desk Dictionary defines it as "wise in looking out for one's own interests." The definition, in turn, brings us to a discussion of the present school climate, because "political" factors and the impact of political interpretation of factors are an important part of that climate.

The Present Climate

When working at either the individual school or the school district level, one comes to an unsettling conclusion. Many educators seem quite satisfied with what is going on. Those who recognize that change is needed

often are unwilling to take the risks or make the effort involved in bringing about improvement. Central office personnel indicate they want change - but claim the folks at the building level resist it. The principal says he or she is ready to move but the staff isn't interested. The teachers say, "If only our principal and the central office would permit it, we'd like to do (such and such)." Change is like the weather--everyone talks about it but no one seems to be able to do anything about it! Yet, each of these levels has prerogatives which they are not exercising and which they could bring into play without anyone else's permission.

Do the superintendent and the board want change? A recent survey of twenty districts in our area showed that an average .35 of one percent of the total budget was spent for staff development. Devoting such a small part of the school's operational funds to inservice education is an indication that instructional improvement is held in low regard.

The primary role of teacher organizations is to secure more pay and benefits and better working conditions for their members - and properly so. However, pupil welfare and the professional skills of members should also be their legitimate concern. In 1975, the Michigan Education Association increased its dues by $12. Some of the allocations of that increase were $1 for political action, $5 to public affairs, $1 to replace furniture, 18¢ for plant operation, 10¢ for leadership development. Obviously, professional development--education for staff change--is low on everyone's agenda.

The last (Eighth Annual) Gallup Poll indicated that citizens were most concerned about lack of discipline, integration, segregation, and busing. Their comments concerning instructional improvement were less often mentioned and centered on a "back to basics" theme--not the type of change most educators see as a top need. Certainly, some individual parents are dissatisfied with the curriculum and some groups--particularly minority parents--have been vocal about their views. On the whole, however, most parents seem not to be overly concerned with the quality of education that is provided.

Administrators often are chosen on the basis of their commitment to and ability to maintain the status quo. The selection process usually used almost guarantees these qualities. In the turmoil of today, the administrator who "keeps the lid on" and keeps trouble away from the central office is the one who is appreciated. Risk-takers who get publicity for their innovative programs may not be welcomed by their superiors and may be looked at with a combination of disbelief and jealousy by their peers.

Outside pressures on educators are many and poweful. Those individuals and groups which initiate this pressure have their own - usually narrow and self serving - agenda. There seem to be as many forces dedicated to keeping things the same as there are interested in introducing new practices. A frustrated curriculum director once told me, "Changing the curriculum is like moving a graveyard. You never know how many friends the dear departed had until you try to move them."

The result of these forces is a curious mixture of inertia and foment, where struggles to maintain individuals' and groups' self interests usually outweigh comprehensive and genuine educational reform. It makes one wonder if significant improvement is desired or even possible.

A cynical but quite accurate example of how the system works may be seen in the implementation of a formal inservice education program. In most districts, time is set aside for staff development. Because of past experience, most teachers are unenthusiastic about attending such sessions. Usually, they have had little to say about the topic under study. It is at this point that an unspoken conspiracy takes place. In an effort to entice the teachers, a "stimulating" (which usually means entertaining) speaker is booked. Teachers go along with the activity if it isn't too painful, if little participation or effort is required, and, above all, if they aren't expected to do anything different. Since dynamic change may be dangerous for the administrator, he or she accepts the arrangement. An inservice session is provided but little develops from it. Everyone is comfortable and the status quo is maintained.

This might be known as "The Great Training Robbery" in that meager resources are used for a low impact experience, thus "stealing" valuable funds which could have been used to generate innovation.

Forces Impacting the Curriculum

Administrators once had an unquestioned corner on power and decision-making. Now, many factors are at work redistributing power and blunting

administrative prerogatives. For easier analysis, four forces affecting the curriculum will be discussed--internal formal forces, internal informal forces, external formal forces, and external informal forces. Although these forces are treated discretely, it must be recognized that they are extremely complex and highly interrelated. Within these forces, many factors exist. It should also be remembered that the focus of this paper is the political factors within a school district and its community. Little space has been given to the impact of politics at the state or national level, even though these are significant areas. In the discussion which follows, some of the major factors in each of the forces will be enumerated and one or more examples of factors will be treated in detail.

School district Internal Formal forces

The more apparent forces which impact the curriculum are the formal organizations within the school and school system. They include board of education, the administration, professional and support staff organizations, negotiated contracts, parent organizations, advisory groups, and student groups.

The intensified adversary relationship between management and teachers brought about by contract bargaining is an important formal factor. This "we"-"they" situation solidifies relations and heightens mistrust which, in turn, works against the establishment of a cooperative climate for change. The contract expresses, in formal terms, the agreements reached. As time goes

by, more and more specific areas are negotiated, leaving less room for departures from the norm. A thick contract is evidence of mistrust, and contracts are getting thicker every year.

Frequently, board members are elected on a platform of cutting school cost. Many seek the position to use as a stepping stone to higher political position or just want the attention and visibility involved. Some are elected as representatives of home owners' groups, parochial school parents, real estate or banking, labor, or even little league interests. Such commitments to outside forces lessen the chance for true board-staff cooperation. Boards which are successful in playing their appropriate policy-making roles and which have pupil learning as a prime value can have tremendous impact on the improvement of the school program. Even though honest differences exist, a board can concentrate on functioning as a team and can focus its considerable power on facilitating appropriate change which benefits pupils.

Negotiated agreements with custodians, clerical workers, and aides also impact educational reform, since teacher and administrator prerogatives may be reduced with each agreement. Often, agreements which make the work situation easier for support staff limit student experiences which are exploratory and creative, since such activities are often messy and noisy.

Parent organization programming too often falls in the same trap as inservice education efforts. Rather than meetings designed to increase understanding of their children, their role as parents, or the school program,

meetings are entertaining or center on raising funds. A better alternative is the establishment of study groups which develop parenting skills, improve staff-parent communication, and foster understanding of the school program.

Districts which have learned to involve community members and students openly and honestly have found a rich source of ideas and a powerful source of support. Too often, however, community advisory groups are formed when a school millage is imminent, or to rubber stamp an administrative decision already made. Student governments, where they exist at all, are also often impotent.

By far the more significant internal formal force is the organizational structure of the school district. If it is highly structured and hierarchical, communication, decision-making, and change will be slow. Where the lines of authority are blurred, where peer leadership and ideas are respected, where involvement and true participation are fostered, there will be significantly more innovation.

School district Internal Informal forces

Informal forces are also at work and can, at times, be more potent than the formal structures. Some of these informal forces are teacher-peer relations, administrator-teacher relations, and parent and student contacts. Other informal factors are things like class size, school size, and the expectations and role definitions of staff members.

Again, because of space limitations, only a few examples can be provided to show how these forces operate. Take the case of a teacher who decides on his or her own that a multi-text approach to teaching science would better meet pupil needs. The administrator is likely to hear from the business office--complaining about the added work of ordering from several rather than one publisher--and from the book store--concerned about shelving and handling the extra load. Some parents will complain about the unconventional teaching methods but more will be worried that their child doesn't have a textbook of his own as has been the practice. They may object to having their offspring participate in an "experimental" program. Other teachers will be concerned that, if the approach is successful, they will be expected to alter their methods. Also, they may be a bit jealous of the attention received if the program really works. The peer pressures we see which are designed to discourage staff departures from the norm are more understandable when we realize the feelings and concerns of those involved. Pupils may feel uncomfortable at being different or being expected to learn in a different way.

The accumulation of all these concerns and objections is likely to cause the administrator and the teacher to conclude that the innovation is not worth the turmoil created. The lesson to be learned is that all of us--students, staff, and community--are creatures of habit and may resist change. We may work against even a change that may be good for us, if we interpret the new

development as a threat. In addition, we will bring intc play the power we have to maintain the position we feel is to our advantage.

School district External Formal forces

In recent years, forces outside the schools have been major factors in attempting to initiate change. Some of these formal forces are elements of the government, foundations, business, industry, labor, the media, publishers, accrediting agencies, religious groups, universities, and many others. In addition, a wide range of citizen organizations--ultra liberal, ultra conservative, super patriotic, civil rights, etc. --have also made their presence felt! A few brief examples will demonstrate how some of these forces have influenced instruction.

Participation in state and federally funded programs requires changes in instructional priorities and resources. The guidelines which accompany these projects often specify in detail factors such as pupil-teacher ratios, qualifications of instructors, and criteria for the facilities of instruction. An example of what sometimes results is, for instance, multiple remedial reading programs for the same students. In reality, sometimes "outside" funds create parallel school systems with their own staff and programs. National and state departments of education which produce these guidelines, and state boards of education which initiate programs of assessment and accountability, are also powerful forces. Court orders have redistricted schools and mandated

desegregation and special education. Legislatures have required compliance in areas of racial, sex, and economic equality and initiated programs such as career, vocational, and metric education.

Foundations, too, have been successful in encouraging attention to their particular areas of interest. Business and industry are concerned that the curriculum give attention to the contribution of the free enterprise system, while labor groups want youth to understand how and why organized labor came about and to appreciate the dignity and worth of the laborer.

Teacher organizations have intervened in the placement of student teachers or even prohibited student teachers in areas where teacher surpluses exist. They have indicated that they will have parity in the governance of teacher centers and in the procedures and structures established to determine national, state, and local instructional priorities.

Sad to say, the major external formal force is the publisher, for, in most cases, the textbook is the curriculum. As the publisher alters the content or organization of his book, the curriculum is changed. Publishers, of course, are in business to make a profit, so sometimes they are quick to try to respond to or even initiate change. A movement such as the "new" math can be a gold mine. Even a degree of failure of the "new" math program can be a bonanza because other materials must be purchased to modify the curriculum. In other cases, it is to the publisher's advantage not to change. Materials to teach handwriting methods have remained the same for decades. Despite very promising

new developments, publishers have, until recently, resisted designing and introducing new materials for this purpose. It is likely that they found it possible to sell sufficient quantities of the old materials and were not motivated to invest the funds required to redesign their programs.

We have even seen efforts on the part of publishers to produce "teacher-proof" materials which, in theory, could make it possible to "guarantee" introduction of an innovation. Publishers and producers of audiovisual equipment are major lobbyists for state and federal legislation. The National Defense Education Act and the past and current Elementary and Secondary Education Acts, and other legislation, mean millions for the suppliers of materials and equipment to schools.

School district External Informal forces

While only internal personnel can actually implement a change, school staff members are greatly affected by external formal and informal forces. Although without legal or formal sanction, external informal groups and individuals make significant impact on the school program. Few influences are so powerful as the direct, face to face plea by a constituent to a school administrator. A well-stated case by even a few very vocal parents often elicits the desired result from a board of education, even though it may not be the view of the majority of the community.

Usually, the reasons for an action of an informal group can be determined. Often, however, actions are triggered by factors not related to an individual's or group's attitudes toward education. Senior citizens, for instance, habitually vote against school millage not so much because they are against education but because they are on a fixed income and any tax increase is a problem. Actually, school elections are one of the few opportunities they have to make their objection to higher taxes. Schools also have been the recipients of a general feeling of hostility toward government and authority in general.

It is interesting to note that in some communities, results of achievement tests are the focus of much concern, discussion, or even outrage. In similar districts where youngsters performed in the same way, the results receive little attention. Often, this is a reflection of the degree of involvement of and communication with the community. Usually, when citizens know what's going on in the schools, they better understand the needs, problems, and accomplishments of the schools. In situations where community involvement does not take place, the vague dissatisfaction may cause citizens to "latch onto" achievement test results to use as a club against a school system they don't understand or are hostile to. Interestingly, most citizens attended public schools and it may be that we are harvesting the resentment engendered by citizens' earlier educational experience.

As pointed out earlier, being "politic" means "wise in looking out for one's own interests." That's what all these forces, be they internal or external,

formal or informal, are busy doing. At times, these forces serve to maintain a balance and guard against faddish or precipitous change. At times, they serve to maintain an unfair status quo and to block seriously needed innovation.

Hope for Educational Change

The possibilities for rational, significant instructional improvement are greater than the pessimistic examples presented thus far. An important step which is required for more meaningful change is for educators to take a new view of the nature of the dynamics in and outside the school and to learn to understand and work effectively with these forces. All in education--teachers, administrators, board members, and university staff--must be aware of these facts:

1. Schools are political-social institutions. Evidence of this is seen at every level from the classroom to the central office.
2. Politics (looking out for one's own interests) is a powerful force at work and affects all kinds of decisions, including instructional ones.
3. Politics are a fact of school life and must be dealt with with understanding and skill. No one is above politics. Politics is not necessarily a dirty business but simply "the art of the possible."
4. It is necessary to recognize these political forces and base our actions on an understanding of the self interests of the individuals

and groups we work with. This is necessary because self interest is a force which motivates all of us.

5. It is possible to help individuals and groups broaden their concept of what is in their interest and to utilize this understanding to help improve instruction.

The writer feels obligated to offer some specific suggestions to aid the educator in working effectively at "the art of the possible." It would be efficacious to provide some discrete models that have proved effective. In reality, the structures and vehicles which will be successful in the educational-political arena will vary from situation to situation. An effective, politically aware educator does not depend on any single strategy or approach.

There are, however, principles and processes that are generic. Educators with a "track record" of success exhibit the following behavior as they work with formal and informal influence structures. The politically aware educator:

1. recognizes, identifies, and works effectively with key decision-makers and significant power groups within and outside the school and school district;
2. makes a continuous effort to establish a climate of openness and trust with these forces; or, where this is not possible, attempts to encourage an attitude of mutual respect; is accepting of and is able to communicate with others whose values and beliefs differ from his/her own;

3. exhibits a visible commitment to early and genuine involvement of representatives of important factions on a parity basis; appreciates the responsibility to understand and work with staff, community, and political power structures;
4. establishes ongoing, two-way communication with influential groups and individuals, using a variety of formal and informal methods;
5. is effective in skillfully and factually relating the "school story" and explaining educational needs;
6. is visible and deeply involved in community affairs;
7. listens to parent, staff, and citizen concerns, and channels these opinions to the appropriate source for consideration;
8. knows and is responsive to student, parent, and community needs;
9. believes positive change is possible and desirable and is proactive rather than reactive in initiating needed changes;
10. works effectively and tirelessly in the interest of the students and the school district; marshalls support to secure and protect their interests;
11. has major goals clearly in mind and, while flexible and willing to compromise, will not "sell out" - even under pressure.

A few examples of some approaches which have worked may be helpful. Again, the suggestions will be organized around the factors identified earlier--internal formal and informal forces and external formal and informal forces.

School district External Formal forces

Boards of education and school staffs have made policy commitments to the community-school concept. This means an educational program dedicated to meeting the needs and interests of citizens of all ages and the schools open to all groups at all hours.

Many districts have established school or systemwide representative community councils to react to ideas, provide feedback, and even officially sanction educational innovations. Parent, teacher, and student organizations, groups of room mothers, and other types of formal structures have aided two-way communication and increased understanding of and support for school programs.

The Northwest Staff Development Council in Wayne County, Michigan, is an example of a fruitful formal force for instructional improvement and inter-group cooperation on a multi-district basis. School district and teacher organization leaders have worked cooperatively from the beginning to plan and implement staff development and curriculum design efforts. The governing group is made up of one representative from administration and one representative of the professional organization from each of the seven autonomous school districts.

The intermediate district and universities are ad hoc members. Early mistrust has been reduced and cooperation has made possible the sharing of knowledge and resources and has greatly enlarged the learning experiences available to the staff involved.

School district External Informal forces

Often, the use of community people and parents as instructional or pupil management aides has been helpful in improving programming and increasing understanding of schools. Using volunteers as resource people greatly enriches the school curriculum. Students' use of the community as a laboratory has increased their learning and marshalled support from business, industry, labor, and government.

Educational leaders' involvement in community affairs has sensitized them to the needs of individuals, groups, and agencies. Administrators have developed programs to meet these requests, such as programs for senior citizens or teaching parenting skills. Educators' responsiveness has gained support for the schools from groups which would otherwise have been hostile.

School district Internal Formal and Informal forces

Ongoing structures for securing staff and student input have been established within districts at the building and systemwide levels. Such organizations also can serve a coordinating and planning function for inservice education and curriculum development.

Parent, staff, and pupil involvement on an informal basis is also valuable. However, a major informal force for support is a school program where students are learning and enjoying it. Students are excellent communicators and can be a powerful aid in eliciting community support and understanding. Staff members are wisely selfish when they create a school environment which is good for pupils.

New skills and approaches are Required

To work in the context of the examples just described will require a different kind of educator. Bringing about these skills, and understanding and successfully implementing these activities, will require new emphasis on the learnings provided to both preservice and inservice personnel. For instance, our present preservice programs do not give much attention to the roles of the teacher and administrator as change agents. Indeed, teacher education is composed largely of methods classes, where the prospective teacher is taught to implement rather than design or develop programs. Little emphasis is placed on the political nature of the school and on the importance of understanding and operating in a political environment. Universities should intensify efforts to provide preservice teachers with first-hand experiences, laboratory learnings, and opportunities to work in local districts to aid their students in understanding the political dynamics of education.

Practicing educators also need these skills. Actually, without these insights and abilities, they may not survive. Despite this need, administrator training infrequently deals with conflict resolution, community and interpersonal relations, team- and trust-building, identifying and working with influence structures, change strategies, and related topics.

Another approach which is needed is the use of skillful change agents in the fostering of curriculum improvement. Such individuals may come from within the system or may be external to the district. They may come from universities, regional or state educational agencies, or they may be private entrepreneurs. With proper involvement and overtime, they can, for instance:

- get the factions together;
- facilitate a climate of trust and communication;
- aid in needs assessment;
- encourage goal- and priority-setting;
- help identify and define problems;
- point out alternative courses of action;
- furnish or suggest resources;
- stimulate innovation;
- help with change processes;
- teach needed skills;
- act as role models.

In addition, through this work with local educators the change agents will facilitate their own professional growth, thus adding to their expertise and usefulness as consultants. It is likely, as these understandings grow, the change agents may become skillful enough to have impact on the establishment within which they work!

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